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I have always been curious about my school's history. While we are currently located in Livingston, NJ, our school was formerly located in central Newark, New Jersey. During a class I was taking (coincidentally on human rights), my teacher sent me an excerpt from a book written by Senator Cory Booker about a low-income housing complex where residents are living in what were described by Senator Booker as "inhumane conditions". I immediately found myself angry and upset about this injustice -- how could it be fair for any child to grow up in such an environment? However, when I reached the end of the excerpt, I was shocked to learn that the housing complex is located at an address that sounded oddly familiar. I soon learned that the location of the housing complex is the location in Newark where my school used to be located! Feeling compelled to learn more about this troubling and personal issue, I decided to do some research about Garden Spires. Here is what I found:



Former Newark Mayor Cory Booker, outside Garden Spires. Photo courtesy of Star Ledger

In 1929, a beautiful colonial building sat on the corner of Orange and First Streets, operating with the lofty ambition of "training and sending [young men and women] to act as leaders in the civic and intellectual life of the community." Today, two apartment buildings known as Garden Spires tower over the corner.

Though much of Newark is a vibrant and thriving community, Garden Spires offers a small window into the poverty and injustice far too many urban Americans continue to face. The two Section-8 housing complexes have been plagued by drug use, gun violence, and crime, and many residents have cited "unbearable" living conditions. The complex has been described as "one of Newark's worst housing projects."

Some efforts have been made to improve the situation, but significant work is still left to be done. In 1999, Senator Cory Booker pitched a tent outside the housing projects, going on a 10-day hunger strike to raise awareness about the complex's deplorable living conditions. Press coverage did help bring about

some positive change. However, the living conditions continue to remain intolerable. Tenant Shonette Parker said that she “wouldn’t wish this on her worstest enemy.”

It’s hard to believe that these “pockets of ‘third world’ nations” exist just minutes away from “incredible wealth and privilege,” a teacher at my school commented. The complex’s nickname, “Academy Spires” – a nod to the site’s former Newark Academy (Newark Academy is my school) occupants –, reflects the disheartening truth that dramatic divides in privilege exist right in our backyards. While it is a fact that this divide does exist and will continue to exist, my school community should feel a certain moral responsibility to help.



Deplorable conditions inside the Garden Spires complex. Photo courtesy of ABC

A teacher at my school explained how students have this responsibility “not just because it is the land we vacated, but because once we see the utter immorality of a society that allows some kids to live without the basic necessities, without safety, without opportunities, and without protection, we know we need to act.”

Senator Cory Booker recently proposed a bill which will ban blacklisting, a practice in which landlords discriminate against residents who have complained about poor living conditions in previous rental homes. If passed, this bill will encourage residents to speak up against unjust living conditions, hopefully moving residents in complexes such as Garden Spires one step closer to the justice they rightfully deserve.

I find it especially interesting how the idea of environmental justice relates to the condition of such housing complexes in cities like Newark. In 2016, Newark made history by passing the first Environmental Justice and Cumulative Impact Ordinance in US history. As an article published in *Clear Air Action* explains, “the City of Newark and urban communities face higher levels of pollution from multiple sources including toxic waste sites, industrial plants, and heavy city and port traffic.” And it is evident that the effects of this pollution are severe -- asthma kills more people in Newark than homicide, and cancer rates due to diesel emissions are especially high in the city. In housing complexes such as Garden Spires, factors ranging from air pollution to unclean drinking water are just compounding already existing problems. Indeed, the environmental factors, in addition to the economic and social factors contributing to the current crisis in Newark, are in immediate need of attention.

TAKING ACTION

In 9th grade, as a part of my Human Rights class, we made a short documentary describing the current conditions in Garden Spires as part of an effort to educate our community. However, it is my hope that action can continue to be taken by my greater school community.

I am currently a co-president of the Green & Blue Committee (an environmental club at my school), and I am thinking of asking Human Rights Club (another club at our school) if they would like to collaborate on a project that could help our school community give back to the Garden Spires community in Newark. I will research legislation addressing the current housing crisis in Newark and in other cities across the country, and perhaps our school can get involved in communicating to our politicians the importance of such laws.

Additionally, freshman year, through my Human Rights class, I got in touch with a local reporter who had written a story about Garden Spires. He was very excited to learn that our school has such a personal connection to the housing complex, and he said he would be interested in writing a news story about the project. While the article never did materialize, we could definitely try to get in touch with this reporter again. A news story that could reach many people could certainly have a substantial impact.

I am very passionate about the connection my school has to the Garden Spires housing complex, and this Project Green Challenge has definitely inspired me to take action again and encourage our campus community to become as involved as possible.